



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1353/cj.2018.0007](https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2018.0007)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Gorfinkel, E. (2018). Promiscuous Histories, Materialist Theories, Speculative Poetics. *CINEMA JOURNAL*, 57(2), 121-125. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2018.0007>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

I want to bring to the surface what has been a subtext so far. The reorganization of the field is likely to shuffle the philosophical bases. To disciplines organized around a media technology, from English onward, aesthetics once seemed a natural way of prioritizing inquiry. We became experts on aesthetics, and most scholarship in the twentieth century originated with a text or set of texts. But utter fragmentation of the aesthetic experience means that for the foreseeable future, ethical, moral, and epistemological inquiries must lead the field. In an age in which social interactions are too often mediated, our field is particularly well suited to generate research on social norms and values. At a time in which the intellectual class is under siege, different social factions are sources of popular knowledges that are altering our understandings of life, nature, and technology.

Although I was partly trained in aesthetics by the UT–Austin Department of Philosophy, I am happy about this move away from aesthetics. It reenergizes media studies and brings new possibilities for cross-disciplinary work. It is in this spirit that I favor big questions and substantive themes, and list among the most urgent ones those that help us expand the universe of moral subjects, as well as those that help us understand new ways of knowing the natural world and ourselves. For these inquiries, our field will find new intellectual partners in departments of science and technology, information sciences, environmental sciences, sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies, politics, and law. The mission of understanding how humans are shaped by technologically defined mediation continues, but in exciting new forms and with a renewed social and political urgency. *

Promiscuous Histories, Materialist Theories, Speculative Poetics

by ELENA GORFINKEL

When I entered graduate school in the late 1990s, my impression of the field of film studies was constituted by a set of tensions and agonistic relations. The university itself seemed a field of contestation, its customs of scholarship and practices of peer review subject to attacks from without and within: the Sokal affair was one prominent flash point, a scandal that purported to be a referendum on the perceived “excesses of postmodernism” in cultural theory but in fact served as a hostile conservative reproach to younger, progressive fields, invested in cultural critique, to stay out of other disciplines’ territory.¹ At the same time, the excitement of new

1 In 1995 New York University physicist Alan Sokal perpetrated a scholarly hoax when he submitted a fake essay written in the “idiom” of postmodern theory to the cultural studies

developments in cultural studies, cultural theory, and critiques rooted in traditions of feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and post- and decolonial histories was palpable. There was the sense that these “new” areas of politicized practice and inquiry disrupted or posed a threat to the old guard of aesthetic analysis, formalism, and close reading, not just in film studies but across the humanities. Just discovering academic life, my low-level disciplinary “aha” moment came in seeing a distinction—between the scholars who had fought for film to be considered an art form, via historical poetics, aesthetic history, or other modes, and the sometimes inchoate interdisciplinarity and prioritization of social relations posed by “cultural studies.” Needing a heuristic, I posed the following questions to scholars I read and to the work of my peers: “Are they interested in film texts, or in people? In what film texts do, or in what people do?” A baldly schematic distinction, no doubt, and one I often asked of myself—at the time, I invariably fell on the side of “people.” A naïve binary, it allowed me to make sense of what the field of film studies was arguing about, against, and for. Does one align with texts, collocated as form, close reading, aesthetics, pattern recognition, the artwork, the film object, cognitive structures, or with people, human subjects, resonant with desire, fantasy, spectatorship, process, labor and its failures, collectivity, the subjective?

It is odd that I drew a line in the sand in that moment, not around an opposition between theory and history—a much-discussed node of debate and contention, then as now—but around a nonhuman and human distinction, a differentiation between object and subject, between form and culture, between a notion of aesthetic autonomy and collective constitution, between the world within the film, made by it, and the world that made the film. Such a preposterous distinction with its obvious flattening and false equivalences seems to me now embarrassingly facile, especially in the presumption that form can ever be quarantined from the labor of its own making or exist outside of politics. Yet however spurious this distinction, it expressed the stakes and hazards of entering a comparably young field, one that contended from its outset with the constant diffusion of screen cultures and moving-image formations beyond its borders. It also reflected a set of anxieties circulating then around the nature of the object of our study and the creeping influence of new knowledge formations and different methodologies. In a state-of-the-field published in these pages in 2004, Jon Lewis, writing on the SCMS at fifty years old, suggested that “losing cinema to cultural studies was inevitable. In the long run (to extinction), taking on such a flexible partner as cultural studies may not, for those of us bound to film in film studies, be such a bad deal.”² The “long run to extinction” may have become rather shorter in this contemporary moment, in which we have edged into global economic, humanitarian, and ecological crises in a new, terrifying, authoritarian political regime.

I came to film studies with an interest in feminist film theory and the cultural politics of the visual, and cinema as a chosen medium was to me frankly an alluring vehicle for

journal *Social Text*; the article explored the “constructed” nature of quantum gravity. It was published in the “Science Wars” issue; at the time the journal did not have an external peer-review process, and the journal’s editorial board took it on faith that the physicist was writing the essay sincerely. Sokal, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” *Social Text* 46–47 (1996): 217–252.

2 Jon Lewis, “Parting Glances,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (2004): 99.

the questions I was most keen on asking: What were sexuality, desire, fantasy? How did taste operate? What might an aesthetic of transgression look like? (Transgression was the sought-after contingency and resistance of the 1990s.) The sense of the splintering or the diversification (whichever way you read it) into so many subfields and the diffraction of moving-image objects and platforms for viewing was not yet in the state of dispersion we see today, although television had long forced the question. But the tension between cultural theory and formalism was prominent, as was the historical turn and the impact of the “post-theory” debates, in which varied forms of empiricism cast a long, aspersive shadow on the now-suspect Theory with a capital “T.” If the field was defined through a shared object—celluloid film—and shared conversations as constituted via different constellations of film theory, we could ask what has happened to the fate of Theory (and practices of theorizing) in the interim?

Although the object of film and media has expanded radically beyond the interrogation of such impossible allegiances (e.g., “which side are you *on*, which media object are you *for*?”) to consider very sophisticated modes, methods, and epistemic frames, we are still left with the sense of an overwhelming, incoherent field, no longer organized by methods or objects. The field still has the general orientation and identification of those who “do” theory and those who “do” history, and indeed job-hiring categories and the way academic positions are allocated still bear this out. But the field holds complicated constellations of research practices that track not only the processes and behavior of humans but also nonhuman technologies, networks, ecologies, and economies.

Cinema and media studies today flouts any pious oppositions of form and culture and navigates questions of circulation, infrastructure, algorithms, labor cultures, technologies, and itineraries, in terms of their patterns and social forms, as well as considering the ontologies, ecologies, and embedded philosophies of cinema and media objects in relation to the social. Beyond the consideration of the “what” of cinema, its ontological constitution as medium, the field is pursuing the “how” and the “where” of the moving image and screen practices, focusing on processes, patterns, locations, rather than manifest content or representation. One arena for such exploration is the thinking through of questions of cinematic relocation (Francesco Casetti) or diffraction—for example, in new accounts of film and media circulation, histories and theories of exhibition, and media archaeologies (Charles Acland, Peter Alilunas, Erika Balsom, Lucas Hilderbrand, Ramon Lobato, Joshua Neves, Jussi Parikka). Another development is the resiting of ontology in other zones of textuality and texture, in film philosophy and phenomenology, and in accounts of synesthesia and intermediality (Jennifer Barker, Robin Curtis, Brigitte Peucker, Scott Richmond, Saige Walton, Jennifer Wild).

Form and content have clearly shifted in emphasis, if not also in meaning, as new formalisms have emerged that consider the deep structures of the image in historical, economic, and ideological registers. Some of the most powerful recent critiques of cinema’s place in economies of exploitation and expropriation are grounded in deeply, inventively formalist modes of reading, for example in Alessandra Raengo’s account of blackness, visual culture, and ontology, and in Nadia Bozak’s consideration of the ecological exhaustion that undergirds cinema’s spatial and temporal extensiveness. While the axis of representation and identity has remained incontrovertibly central

to film and media studies, a countervailing tendency indicates a movement away from the privileging of representation as a field of analysis, akin to the sense articulated in Nigel Thrift's notion of nonrepresentational theory and emblematic in the ascendance of affect theory, among other developments in the humanities.³

At the bleeding edge of new conjunctions of film studies and theory, politics and ontology are a troubled, if heady, mix, as the seeking of stable ground from which to theorize continually recedes and shifts. One could contend that the seeking of certitude or an essence of film and media in new philosophical inquiries and in the resurgence of ontology comes at least partly as a symptom of a repressed or circumvented problem of politics as the terrain of individual agents, political will, and agency. It also radiates from a rejection of psychoanalysis as one definitive method of understanding the human subject and forms of self and psyche, intention and motivation—a psychoanalytic frame that so organized the “grand theory” tradition of feminist film studies and apparatus theory in the 1970s and 1980s. We have today given ourselves over to the temporality of the network, the algorithm, and unyielding connectivity, which entails desubjectivation in perniciously troubling, if sometimes also seductive, ways.

In contrast to the guiding hold subjectivity had on film theory throughout the 1990s, we can also see a ceding of space to the question of objects, inflected by developments in media theory and histories of specific technologies. Considering the medium as object, the media object as a shifting and mutating form, has been displaced by new processes, practices, and methods but also relocated into what I see as conceptual objects, or allegorical-theoretical tropes—ideas that frame or allegorize, like core samples across very different types of investigation. In this vein, we might think about the varied books and edited collections that have organized many theoretical conversations and recalibrations in the field, ones that circulate around space, time, movement, animation, light, format, platform, scale, and mapping, as well as stillness and slowness (Sean Cubitt, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, Bliss Cua Lim, Song Hwee Lim, Jean Ma, Karen Redrobe, Lisa Parks). The spatial turn led to the temporal turn that has of late led to an infrastructural and ontological re-turn, a flipping of emphasis in which cultural, economic, and technological modes give form and metaphorical valence to abstract apparatuses. Theorizing happens through the material specificity of chosen archives and emerges from the textuality of given film texts and constellations of practices, regional specificities, and global modes of circulation, clearly lessons learned in and through the emergence of new historicism as well as materialist, cultural, and ethnographic approaches to media. There are also new modes of allegorical methodology in which theoretical claims are anchored to concrete texts and objects and made to figure larger developments in moving-image culture (Caetlin Benson-Allott, J. D. Connor). Cinephilia, the amatory relation to film form and film feeling, and cinephile-inflected criticism have also migrated into the film object itself, as videographic criticism inhabits and recasts the film text from within through forms of filmed film criticism, aided by digital technologies and modes of capture (Catherine Grant, Christian Keathley, Adrian Martin).

3 Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Film studies has always been an interdisciplinary and humanistic field, and the humanities might be where the urgency of film and media studies is both felt most avidly but also dispersed and diffused most thoroughly. The defunding of the humanities at the institutional, state, and federal levels is perennially imminent and has created a consistent state of crisis and a feeling of continued embattlement—seeds partly sown two decades ago in the Sokal and post-theory moment. What is fundamentally at stake in cinema and media studies in the present might be what is also at stake for the humanities as a whole. The challenge for collective identification and shared discourse comes as much from the conditions of our academic labor and the infrastructure of our beleaguered public institutions and of higher education as a *public* good in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Graduate students and young scholars are under increased pressure, and the shrinking number of tenure-track jobs, the adjunctification of the university, and the ongoing and intensifying assault on the university as a sphere of critique, of noninstrumentalizable knowledge, demands different strategies of collective organizing and imagining.

I suppose that my own tastes for reading, for research and for general affirmation-seeking navigate toward forms of writing that are hybrid, experimental, speculative, adjacent to, or at odds, in one way or another, with a properly disciplinary film studies discourse. In the hyperinstrumentalization of our work at public institutions where accountability, job training, performance metrics, steady outputs, and facilitating workforce readiness are relentless demands, the value of the humanistic approach to scholarship, to reading, and to life clings to immeasurable experiences and activities, ones whose impact cannot be tracked or converted into data. Beautiful, expressive, speculative writing that embraces risky abstraction is often a casualty of such professional logics. It would be facetious to say that our discipline should aspire to poetry. Nevertheless, the poetic, neither a space apart nor a space of respite but rather a domain of habitation and taking time, may provide us with the energy, the light, the diagnostics, and the capacity for doing, being, and living otherwise. So, I am reading Anne Boyer, Rebekah Rutkoff, Nathalie Léger, and Claudia Rankine.⁴ Not an alternative space but a space for taking care of alterity. *

4 Anne Boyer, *Garments against Women* (Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2015); Rebekah Rutkoff, *The Irresponsible Magician: Essays and Fictions* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext[e], 2015); Nathalie Léger, *Suite for Barbara Loden* (London: Les Fugitives, 2015); Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2014).